

Hughes's Oedipus - by many hands

The programme cover of *Seneca's Oedipus* (1968) reveals that the play was originally billed as translated by David Turner and adapted by Ted Hughes. Since then it has been stationed among Hughes's body of classical translation, beginning with *The Storm* (1960), a translation for radio of an extract from Homer's *Odyssey*, and ending with his version of Euripides' *Alcestis* (1999), via the celebrated *Tales From Ovid* (1997) and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (1999).¹ Turner, the translator who first pitched Seneca's tragedy to the National Theatre, has in the wake of Hughes's celebrity suffered a kind of *damnatio memoriae*. It is one of my aims in this essay to reveal the true extent of his contribution. Another is to cut through the surface of Hughes's mythologized account of his own translation practice and ask why he felt the need to exaggerate his scholarship, and why we, public and critics alike, are so ready to play along. I hope this process might show how the analysis of translation in terms of proximity and fidelity to a source can be a hindrance to our understanding of what a translator actually does, and therefore perhaps what a translation is, when it is not simply an act of literary preservation or a study aid.

It is worth saying from the outset that each translator for the stage, or translator of poetry as poetry, has practical methods, ideological goals and linguistic abilities of their own, which are often unknown, subject to change and quite personal to them. In order, however, to display the credentials that audiences and critics expect from a 'translator' or 'adaptor', there is a certain amount of pressure on a practitioner retrospectively to tidy up and mythologize their translation practice in terms that enhance its cultural legitimacy. Even if many critics now profess not to care, it will never be especially fulfilling for any writer to admit to a lack of knowledge or skill, and thus acknowledge another writer's potentially 'purer' or more

¹ *The Storm* was unpublished until *Collected Poems* (2003), but was aired on BBC's *The Third Programme* on 10 Nov. 1960, see Gillespie in Rees (ed.) (2009) 25-38. For discussion of Hughes's engagement with classical literature and his translation practice see Rees (ed.) (2009), Bassnett (2009), Weissbort (2011) and Zajko in Gifford (ed.) (2011).

impressive relationship with their source, when they have recently completed the not meagre task of creating a new play or poem. This situation becomes less appealing when the prolonged and intense engagement with that source has created an intimate bond between poet and source that both seems, and is, stronger than the schooled ability to decode a passage of Greek or Latin.

Most modern classical performance texts staged or aired today are being written by poets and playwrights, not people who necessarily identify themselves as translators. For the most part they do not work directly from original texts.² And even if they do, they do not work alone but are supported by the presence of previous translations, commentaries and web-based resources. When I translate for performance cultural restoration is the last thing on my mind. I am simply trying to make something new out of something old, something that excites, entertains, communicates with an audience out of something that in its current form no longer does. Translation for performance does not draw on the same skill sets as pioneer translation, the creation of cribs, or translations for literary study.³ A live audience is not concerned with the ancient source, nor with the process by which it has been transformed. The most important thing is the final product (of which the script is only one part) and its ability to communicate with its audience.

The ability to read in (or perhaps more frequently with ancient texts to decode) the language of a source text may often be obviated partially or altogether by a writer's use of previous translations, but it nevertheless occupies a central position in current popular and critical expectations of the role of a translator. I would, therefore, like to offer an alternative model for the measurement of the ability to engage with classical texts in place of the persistent perception that people either can or cannot access them directly. This clunky binary

² A notable exception is Tony Harrison.

³ Thankfully there are scholars and writers whose primary concern is to recast classical texts in their own language. I use the term 'pioneer translation' as the translation of something previously untranslated in a particular language. 'Crib' denotes a literal translation designed to read in a manner that assists students to access the original, and therefore conforms strictly to the way in which the language is taught.

division should be replaced by a sliding scale, the barely perceptible poles of which are marked ‘can read like an educated ancient’ and ‘cannot make head nor tail of it’. Somewhere in the middle, not far from the ‘cannot...’ end, reside a large cluster of writers, who – without, or with some limited formal or informal training in Greek or Latin – have the potential, given time with translations and paratextual aids, to become familiar with and highly responsive to the creative dynamics of a classical source.⁴ Overlapping considerably with this cluster and tailing off rapidly as movement is made towards the distant ‘can...’ end of the scale, we find those writers who nominally ‘have’ the ancient languages. Within this cluster will be enormous variety in terms of depth and quality of understanding of the original text and reliance on paratextual aids. In other words the binary notion of ‘having’ and ‘not having’ a classical language, still prevalent today at least in popular discourse, is of no critical use and in fact nourishes a damaging popular perception of classical culture, lingering from a time in which formal classical attainment was a tool of social exclusion.⁵

On a hunt for Turner’s script I came across the ‘Ted Hughes Collection’ (*THC*) in the special collections of the University of Liverpool. Here I was able to access not only Turner’s script but also Hughes’s manuscript drafts of *Oedipus*, his very own Loeb edition, complete with scribbled marginalia, and an unexpected hoard of writings relating to *Oedipus*.⁶ A particularly important find in the archive was a stack of multiple drafts of Hughes’s official account of his translation process and use of sources. Since there is more than one draft, it is possible to

⁴ By paratextual aids I mean the range of resources designed to facilitate access to classical texts, e.g. dictionaries, commentaries, translations, electronic tools et c.

⁵ See Stray (1998), and Hall in Hardwick and Stray (2008) 386-97.

⁶ Hughes’s copy of Miller’s Loeb, MS.24.58(20); Turner’s script, MS.24.56(9); sundry MS.24.55-58 (identified individually where appropriate below).

witness the development of an incrementally thickening smokescreen, designed to hide what Hughes seems to have considered as a partially illegitimate translation process.⁷

Oedipus opened at the Old Vic on 17th March 1968.⁸ The traditional account of how Hughes came to work on the script suppresses a number of details, which are important for us to understand how Hughes's text came about. It is commonly understood that when Peter Brook took over the production of Seneca's *Oedipus*, he found the existing commissioned script written by Turner to be unsuitable to his ideas about the play. For this reason Hughes was brought in and Turner bowed out, graciously acknowledging the superiority of Hughes's script:

'This is all Ted Hughes' work and for its excellence I can take no credit – only for its existence. In this I was as blind an instrument of fate as Oedipus, except this time fate was being kind. Not to me, no, but surely to every member of the audience who saw the production, and to every reader who encounters the poet's mystery in these dramatic pages.'⁹

Betrayed just a fraction by the 'Not to me, no...' lies hidden an altogether uglier tale. Thanks to the archive material in Liverpool, which by and large provides Hughes's side of the story, and The National Theatre Archive (*NTA*), which shows the National's side, a fascinating sequence of events begins to reveal itself. It is fortunate that this record of events exists because it acts as an important example of just how complex and pressurized the writing context of commercial dramatic translation can become.

On 5th January 1967 a jubilant Turner signed and posted back to the National the contract for the performance of his translation of Seneca's *Oedipus*. On 22nd September Peter Brook was loaned to the National to take over the production of *Oedipus* from Laurence Olivier. On 8th November Kenneth Tynan, then the National's literary manager, invited

⁷ Much of a similar account is held among the 'Ted Hughes Papers and Related Collections' at Emory University. Liverpool University's *THC* holds variant drafts of the account and the only surviving copy of Turner's full script, printed in generous extract in Corrigan (ed.) (1990).

⁸ *NTA* catalogue.

⁹ Turner, 'A Word about Oedipus', in Hughes (1969) 9.

Hughes to work on the play.¹⁰ In a follow up letter to Hughes, who responded quickly and positively, Tynan described Turner's translation as: "a very good best, but at moments of crisis he does tend to reach for the generalised word rather than the poetic one – and by poetic I mean, of course, the special dark biting laconic poetry of Seneca."¹¹ Hughes described Turner's script at his most charitable as 'a chatty but quite lively version'.¹²

Having received a copy of Turner's text from Tynan in November 1967, Hughes worked up six pages of revised text, on the strength of which he was invited to 'do the whole play.' What was meant by 'doing the whole play' by this point was still explicitly revising Turner's prose script. And this is what Hughes began to do:

I completed a version of about two thirds of the play, working from the Turner, with an occasional glance at the original to get my bearings, submitted it by post to Mr Brook, and received his criticisms over the phone.¹³

Manuscript variance of this sentence shines an interesting light through the assured surface of Hughes's composition myth. In an earlier draft Hughes's 'occasional glance at the original' is substituted by the more candid: 'working from the Turner and the American Victorian translation Miller.'¹⁴ By the time the information reaches public view a shroud of professed direct encounter has veiled both Turner's and Miller's translations:

We found the only way forward was for me to go back to the original Seneca, eking out my Latin with a Victorian crib.¹⁵

In the copy owned by Hughes, Miller's Loeb edition contains marginalia on the right hand page (the English side), and perhaps significantly not once on the left (the Latin side). Miller's translation, which Hughes noted as having 'the virtues, among its vices, of being extremely weighty and literal', is relegated to playing the auxiliary role of 'eking out' his

¹⁰ *NTA*, Production box, *Oedipus* 1968.

¹¹ Letter dated 10 November 1967, *THC*, MS24.58(1).

¹² *Letters* 281.

¹³ *THC*, MS.24.55(3).

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Hughes, T. (1969) 7.

Latin. Hughes seems to have felt compelled to display a direct engagement with Seneca's Latin, perhaps to maintain his public image as a learned man of letters. This alteration seems to tap into the more widely disseminated and socially divisive myth that anyone who was taught Latin at school, could in theory resuscitate their nostalgically-heightened linguistic ability to the extent that they could read just about anything in classical Latin. This thought, however incorrect, has assured generations of "cognoscenti" legitimate ownership of classical culture, which has played a not insignificant role in class division.¹⁶ Hughes's faltering decision to engage with this myth might well indicate an internal struggle between his own working class Northern upbringing and his perception of the cultural expectations of the Metropolitan literary élite.

After submitting the near complete revision of Turner's *Oedipus*, Hughes met again with Tynan and Brook. It was at this meeting in early January 1968 that Hughes says he discovered that Brook had abandoned Turner's text completely. Hughes went as far as to call it 'a red herring which had cost us six weeks to get away from.'¹⁷ He explains further that up to that point he had done his best to deliver what the theatre had wanted from him, which was:

to retain and highlight what seemed to me the best possibilities in Mr Turner's translation. But it was crippling work, in short Mr Turner's version is unusually idiosyncratic and often arbitrary... It was a great relief to me to learn that the desirable prima materia was not what Mr Turner had made out of Seneca's *Oedipus* but what Seneca had made out of *Oedipus*.¹⁸

Even though it is clear Hughes cared little for Turner's translation it would have been a wrench to cut free completely six weeks' work, especially work he described in a letter to Peter Redgrove as 'a soul-searching type of rewrite.'¹⁹ On the positive side the decision to cut loose from Turner's version granted Hughes the longed-for power to edit without restraint or regard for the previous translation. Hughes, however, did not go back to a completely blank

¹⁶ c.f. fn.5.

¹⁷ *THC*, MS.24.55(1-4).

¹⁸ *ibid*.

¹⁹ *Letters* 281.

page. How could he? The cast were already rehearsing his revision of Turner's script. Instead, it seems, he attempted to rub Turner out of his own text by a number of editing methods, ranging from simple phrase inversion and word replacement to considerable cutting, fusing with Miller, and addition of original material. In that same letter to Redgrove, Hughes confidently claimed that 'the first translation [Turner's] has vanished.'²⁰ As a mode of translation this deletion and overwriting of a former translation is intriguing, and more common than we might like to think.

A more literal translation, like Miller's, with a less familiar and idiosyncratic voice than Turner's, might have provoked a less aggressive kind of rewriting. Part of Hughes's frustration must come from the fact that he was used to working with far more literal translations as a starting point in his modern European translation projects. Turner's text was making interpretative decisions and therefore narrowing Hughes's interpretative range. Because of their different translation goals, styles and emerging practical considerations (from Brook) the two translators were pulling their sources in different directions. Turner's aim was to bring the Seneca up to date and make it accessible to a modern audience via fast-moving prose, initially for BBC radio.²¹ Hughes on the other hand, with Brook's encouragement, was stripping the play right back, unearthing the original's primitive mythic power using English poetry. It was difficult for Hughes to do this from Turner's text. It was too contemporary, too interpretative, too close to his own language. Miller's text in contrast would have felt like the real thing. It did not bear the markings of a modern translator. It would have felt anonymous, un-crafted and foreign enough to be treated as Seneca's own text.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Both Hughes in his notes *THC*, MS.24.55(1-4) and Sir John Gielgud, in a joint interview with Brook by John Bowen for BBC Radio 3 in 27th March 1968, mention that Turner was a BBC producer – but little is yet known of Turner's biography, and the recording of the show in question (purportedly broadcast on BBC Ireland), is nowhere to be found.

Although Hughes gave the impression that he used Miller to help him engage with Seneca's Latin, I have found no convincing textual evidence of Hughes importing directly from the Latin whatsoever. In a draft of his notes Hughes wrote that as soon as he had realised that Turner's text was dropped:

I understood my commission to be altered. I was no longer adapting Mr Turner's version, I was adapting Miller's version.²²

Here we have in plain English that Hughes was working from the Miller and not from the Latin. This may be an early draft of the account, but is it really plain English? Where this is found, Hughes was carefully putting in writing information about his work with the National with the explicit purpose of protecting his work, should a legal case about copyright arise. By his declaration of switching from Turner's to Miller's translation he was attempting to safeguard his rights against any claim Turner might make. Miller's translation, printed first in 1917, would have fallen into the public domain in 1960 – following the maximum two terms of 28 years of protection, presided over by contemporary US copyright laws. This does not, of course, mean that we should necessarily believe that Turner was no longer used by Hughes in his translation.

The discrepancies between Hughes' various accounts raise a number of questions. The first I would like to address is: has Turner's version of *Oedipus* really 'vanished' from Hughes's script. Or can we still see it? Let's take a look at the texts.

Seneca *Oedipus* 1-7, 12-22:

Iam nocte Titan dubius expulsa redit
Et nube maestus squalida exoritur iubar,
Lumenque flamma triste luctifera gerens
Prospiciet avida peste solatas domos,
Stragemque quam nunc fecit ostendet dies.
Quisquamne regno gaudet? O fallax bonum,
Quantum malorum fronte quam blanda tegis!²³

²² *THC*, MS.24.55(1-4).

Miller (1917):

Now night is driven away; the hesitant sun returns,
and rises, sadly veiling his beams in murky cloud;
with woeful flame he brings **a light of gloom** and
will look forth upon our homes stricken with raven-
ing plague, and day will reveal the havoc which night
has wrought.

Does any man rejoice in royalty? O deceitful
good, how many ills dost hide beneath thy smiling face!

Turner (1967):

OEDIPUS: **Night has lost...** Now the sun limps back,
glints through a tawdry cloud...Woebegone...
Spread out **below it**, houses... ours... Fodder
for the hungry plague.
Day coming will show us how many died last
night... Can any man enjoy being a King?
A blessing? What a cheat! Behind the smile,
The smooth front, - agony!²⁴

Hughes (1969):

CHORUS: **night is finished** but day is reluctant the sun
drags itself up out of that filthy cloud it stares
down at our sick earth it brings a **gloom** not light

beneath it our streets homes temples gutted with the
plague it is one huge plague pit the new heaps
of dead spewed up everywhere hardening in the
sickly daylight

However much it may have been mulched down, fused with Miller and cut at by Hughes's aggressive editing process, from the very first line traces of Turner are still visible. 'Night is finished [pause]' is clearly a variant of Turner's 'Night has lost... [pause],' rather than engaging with Miller's 'night is driven away' or Seneca's own 'nocte explusa'. On its own this is a long way from out-and-out proof of a sustained engagement with Turner's text. Further evidence comes when the sun has finally risen in both sixties versions. The positioning of the homes below the sun are the same in both, and not through the agency of

²³ I take the Latin text from the Loeb (1917/1960) because it was the one certainly owned by Hughes, and most likely by Turner too. I have formatted it as closely as possible to the Loeb printing, because such details affect the reading process.

²⁴ MS.24.56(9). These first lines of *Oedipus* in Turner's text are previously unpublished and were believed to have been omitted, see Weissbort (2011).

Miller or Seneca. Turner has ‘below it’ which Hughes changes to ‘beneath it.’ The position of the homes in relation to the sun is, of course, quite natural - just as ‘Night is (or has) finished (or lost)’ is no enormous conceptual leap from ‘nocte expulsa.’ But – as is often the case – the cut and swap is apparent by what it leaves behind. Despite their minuteness such details clump together to build quite a case. The quantity and consistency of such correspondences throughout the play, combined with more overt ones (noted below) and the certain knowledge that Hughes worked intensively on Turner’s text (for at least 6 weeks), indicate direct engagement with what was once a primary source.

The first five lines of Seneca’s *Oedipus* gradually and impressionistically set the grim scene of a city undone by plague. Events have taken such an unnatural turn that when night has gone, day does not much fancy taking its place. Instead the sun grimly and vaguely reveals to the reader and audience the ‘homes stricken with ravaging plague’ and the ‘havoc [*stragem*] which night has wrought’. Seneca’s vague and mysterious ‘stragem’ is made explicit by Turner, narrowing down the possibilities of interpretation somewhat mundanely to the quantity of people who died in the night. It is likely that Turner’s stress on the quantity of the dead and the relative impotence of his phrasing that stimulates Hughes to his first significant departure from his sources:

... it is one huge plague pit the new heaps
of dead spewed up everywhere hardening in the
sickly daylight

The visually evocative and tactile blend of heaps of plague-ridden cadavers and drying vomit is powerful and the first unmistakable flourish of Hughes’s pen.

Beyond the words, something else that jumps out from the comparison of these texts is the similarity of layout and spacing in the sixties versions. Even if this formal influence on Hughes was subliminal, the precedent is clear to see in Turner’s script, which is otherwise

presented in the standard BBC radio script format. The spaces in both texts to varying degrees of utility control the vocal delivery of the script. Hughes's use of the form is consistent, more stylized and even takes over from conventional punctuation altogether.

This move away from standard format and standard punctuation may be seen as an attempt by Hughes to distance his work from negative contemporary perceptions of classical culture, which he seems to allude to when he writes that he attempted 'to lift the play as far as possible out of the classical literary world' and 'to bring the full strength of the original clear of the Roman museum impedimenta.'²⁶ In these two casual turns of phrase Hughes identifies two important challenges he was experiencing. By them he was referring to the bookish and dusty classical aesthetic, which for Hughes and contemporaries was probably closer to the dated language of the "Victorian crib" and the dim recollection of reading Caesar in the classroom, than it was to the more enlightened modern classical writing by the likes of Louis MacNeice. Classical culture carried strong connotations of elitism because a Latin O-level was still for Hughes's generation an entry requirement for Oxbridge. The 'Roman museum impedimenta' refers to the approach to classical culture of restoration and re-enactment, which both Hughes and Brook were keen to avoid.

Hughes's decision to formally defamiliarize his text was made in part to steer clear of these pitfalls. At a less public and more practical level, however, he was also granting himself space, visually, from his sources – especially Turner's script. The fact that Hughes's impulse to print his verse in this way may actually have originated from the layout of Turner's own script, goes to show just how chaotic the processes of influence in poetic translation can be. Similar methods of structural distancing from mediating sources must be common in translation and adaptation.²⁷

²⁶ Hughes seems himself to harbour these negative perceptions of classical culture.

²⁷ George Lamb's (1821) translation of Catullus owes much to John Nott's (1795) translation, which the former attempted to subsume. The selection of different poetic forms plays no small part in Lamb's attempt to avoid showing dependence on a mediating translation, Stead (2011).

As can be seen from the numerous drafts of his preface to the 1969 book edition, Hughes found it hard to describe Seneca's style. When he first approached *Oedipus* he explains that he felt the play to be: 'a corrupt Roman melodrama, a shameless conglomeration of mythological horrors and second-hand literary references.' In an earlier draft he called it: 'a patchwork of plagiarisms, an all-star billing of other men's most lurid inventions, and a jumble of tired mythological references.' As the drafts are burnished towards publication, however, Hughes's respect for Seneca ostensibly increases tenfold. Hughes tells how he was:

gradually forced to see the deep poetic design that holds it all together... Behind the second-hand Roman rhetoric you sniff not only the nightmare of Nero's Rome, but the thoroughly barbaric lunar spirit which is under the true poetry of Western Europe, and you remember that Seneca was a Spaniard.²⁸

The emphatic conclusion that Seneca was a Spaniard has less to do with Seneca's actually being Spanish as it did with his not being Roman – which of course he was too. Hughes's focus on Seneca's geographical origin indicates a literary affiliation, linked - as it is - to the 'barbaric lunar spirit'. The expression alludes to Robert Graves's *White Goddess*, which exerted an important influence on Hughes. It implies, in a Gravesian sweep, that true poetry is otherwise absent from Roman, or Apollonian, literature.²⁹ The expectation, which was eventually unfulfilled by Hughes's experience of the surprisingly 'lunar' Seneca, was that since Seneca was a Roman he ought to have written derivative poetry, regurgitated from the Greek and earlier Roman poetic traditions. In another draft his defence of Seneca continues: "But he was not a literary pasticheur. Under the bookish surface is something still molten." Hughes's pulls Seneca away from the 'bookish' classical tradition and realigns him "closer to Shakespeare than to Sophocles, and here at the beginning of a tradition rather than the end."

²⁸ *THC*, MS.24.55(3).

²⁹ This literary dichotomy, which seems to separate 'true', 'Muse-poetry' from other less inspired forms of verse draws on ideas promoted in Graves (1948/1999). There may also be identified a broader 'anticlassical' feeling in these lines, i.e. Apollonian poetry might well extend to the Greek literary tradition.

Seneca's primal intensity as well as his poetic craft managed to overcome Hughes's initial prejudice against Roman culture, informed no doubt, not just by Graves, but also by his early encounters with classics at school. These ideas did not survive the final edit, but they provide a fuller insight into Hughes's attitude towards Seneca, Roman culture and classicism in general.³⁰

Hughes's greater familiarity with Seneca, gained through his creative engagement with his translation sources, alongside his in depth discussions with other members of the production team, afforded him the confidence to develop a bolder critical appraisal of Turner's work. For example, he claims that his version is 'considerably closer to the original' than Turner's. By this he can only mean that it is considerably closer to his idea of the Latin as created from the problematic albeit instructive process of his deMillerizing Miller's Seneca. In any case the claim that Hughes's text is 'closer' to either side of the Loeb is simply untrue. Turner's translation may often be impressionistic and interpretative, but in general he adheres more tightly to the sequence and style of delivery of Seneca's words than Hughes does.

An example can be found in the translation of lines 101-2 of Seneca's *Oedipus*:

nodosa sortis verba et implexos dolos
ac triste Carmen alitis solvi ferae³¹

Miller has:

The lot's intricate, guile-entangled words, the grim riddle of the winged beast, I solved.

Turner has:

OEDIPUS:

... **I took** what she gave me, **words in knots**,
a tangle of tricks, the wild **Bird-Woman's** riddle
of death – and solved it.

³⁰ Zajko in Gifford ed. (2011), Rees ed. (2009), Taplin in Wiseman ed. (2002) 9.

³¹ Lit: 'I solved the knotty words of chance and interwoven tricks / and the sad song of the winged beast.'

Hughes has:

OEDIPUS: ...
the
riddle that monster's justice **which was a death**
sentence a trap of forked meanings **a noose of**
knotted words yet **I took** it I undid it I
solved it

that was the time to die all this frenzy now this
praying for death it's too late Oedipus

JOCASTA:
you wear the crown which was your prize for killing
that **birdwoman** the sceptre's your prize

Turner's translation of these lines (101-2), for example, is a sensitive modern dramatization of Seneca's Latin. 'Words in knots' clearly engages with the Latin of 'nodosa verba' rather than Miller's 'intricate, guile-entangled words', which counters Hughes's suggestion that Turner was doing 'much as I did – used Miller, with reference to the original', when arguing about how the play should have been billed.³² Miller, with a scholarly and artful flourish, strays from the Latin choosing instead to represent the knottiness of Seneca's expression by his own stylized word order. The fact that the Latin is *en face* in his Loeb edition does not always restrict creativity, as one might assume, but allows some freedom for the translator to provide the altogether different bilingual reading experience.³³ With both Miller and Turner a direct connection with the Latin is observed in these lines. Hughes's is an extrapolation of Turner's text. I say this because he keeps Turner's 'I took it', absent from the Latin and Miller. He paraphrastically renders Turner's 'riddle of death', making it 'the riddle... which was a death sentence', and elaborates his 'words in knots' to 'a noose of knotted words.' I supply Jocasta's lines in Hughes only to show his importation of 'birdwoman' for *alita fera* – 'winged beast', which is clearly no far cry from Turner's 'bird-woman', and thus one of those more overt correspondences promised above.

³² *THC*, MS.24.55(1-4).

³³ Hughes calls Miller's translation a 'crib' and a 'word-for-word'. This is not the case.

Hughes uses Miller's 'slow to speak' and perhaps his use of Oedipus' name. Turner visibly grapples with the complex tone of Tiresias' poetical address, but in doing so lands on a reductive and particularly prosaic interpretation of it. Hughes's 'be patient' effectively glosses the problem by keeping it simple and passing the buck of characterization of the blind seer to the non-textual realm of the theatre. The parallels in the expressions, 'I ask for time' and 'A blind man misses...' indicate that for Hughes Turner's text had still been first port of call, even if he also drew from Miller. The consistency of identifiable verbal correspondences throughout Hughes's text indicate not only that his translation drew extensively from both Miller and Turner, but also that his account of his relationship with his sources is misleading.

From Hughes's writing about Seneca's *Oedipus* it is clear that he developed a deep understanding and ownership of the text. Such a sense of ownership grows slowly and with prolonged engagement with a text. Hughes found it impossible to edit Turner out of his text because - by the time he aimed to do this - he had already poured his own voice into it, so that what survived from Turner's script had become permanent and indivisible from his own.

The answer to whether Turner's text 'vanished' or not seems to me to be both yes and no. Its influence is there for all to see; traces of the text are present throughout Hughes's version. This said, when we read the book or listen to the recording, and presumably see the play, we knowingly experience nothing of Turner. It might even be said that the surviving words from Turner's script now have come to belong to Hughes, not only in his script, but also among his work as a whole. There is a verbal, tonal, and thematic consistency that makes *Oedipus* unmistakably Hughesian.

A poet's life and work might in part be viewed as the creation of a filter, through which information – literary and non-literary, old and new – travels, and in composition becomes uniquely his or her own. If we look at poetic translation in a similar way we begin to

understand that what is important to the writer is not so much from where the information comes, how they access it or from how many different sources; a successful poetic translation is the passing of information through a poet's filter, in which the vehicles of information, the manner, languages, personalities, are to varying degrees dissolved and replaced in composition by those of the new poet.

If we follow this idea then, what happens to the original poet? Can we still partially detect his or her presence, or voice? Does a reader or listener of a modern classical text, as Sarah Annes Brown suggests with Hughes's translation, hear 'a chord rather than a single note'?³⁵ Or is Seneca's voice overdubbed and subsumed like Turner's in the process of rewriting? Someone familiar with an original text might well be able to recognise certain elements of the source in the new version. But in the moment of performance if the audience becomes aware of 'co-authorship' - when it is not explicitly promoted by the use of allusion - I would suggest that something is going wrong. It means the skin is not thick enough. When I read Hughes's *Seneca's Oedipus* despite the promise of its title I hear only Hughes, and I hope in performance I should hear only the voices of the actors, with the unifying presence of a single hand behind them. I think this is where many more 'invisible' translations fall flat. The skin is not thick enough to win our trust and allow us to invest ourselves entirely in the poem or the play.

So far I have focused exclusively on the literary act of translating for the stage, that is the creation of a script from its sources. This is only one part of an altogether larger process of dramatic translation, in which there are many collaborators. Brook, in the same interview as quoted above from March 1968, explained how Hughes:

... went immediately to work and doing an adaptation which at first stuck very close to the Seneca and then gradually freed itself and in the process of rehearsal. He worked as an author of a new

³⁵ Brown in Rees (2009) 286.

play would do. In other words developing themes rewriting passages, so that it is now a faithful and yet developed adaptation of Seneca...³⁶

When asked about the additions made to the original by Hughes, Brook responded:

He has greatly adapted the part of Jocasta. We all felt that this was a weakness of Seneca's play, that we had Irene Worth playing a part that wasn't really a good enough part. Although the figure was good enough to ask her to play, the role wasn't. And we felt that in making a better part for her we could also make a truer play because *Oedipus* is about Oedipus and Jocasta...

Brook goes on to say that Jocasta's role:

In fact is the only particular singular element that I could take/quote that Ted Hughes very considerable extended.

This shows how in a commercial theatrical production the source, whether classical or not, gives right of way to the approaching production. A writer for theatre, as much as a director, has his or her eye on the audience – and the process of communicating to that projected audience is influenced by entirely practical concerns. Hughes's increasing of the part of Jocasta not only benefitted his argument over intellectual property but it also shows a significant movement away from his translation ethics of modern poetry.³⁷ The very identification of the need to increase Jocasta's role (from 22 to 146 lines) shows how strongly Hughes was prepared to 'domesticate' his source by making it conform to the play's modern dramatic context.

Hughes himself wrote in an early draft of his prefatory note for the book of *Seneca's*

Oedipus:

Since I'd never worked in the theatre before, it was a revelation to me how, beginning with the Latin and a crib, everybody taking part gradually developed and intensified a common vision of the whole thing, under Peter Brook's direction, till my final version crystallized quite suddenly, in a way that has been difficult to alter since.³⁸

³⁶ c.f. fn.21.

³⁷ For discussion of Hughes's relatively 'foreignizing' code for translating modern poets see Weissbort (2011) and Bassnett (2009).

³⁸ Pages 1-2 of a typewritten draft of preface for *Seneca's Oedipus* (1969), entitled: 'PREFATORY NOTE FOR OEDIPUS', *THC*, MS.24.55.

The collaborative atmosphere of the theatre seems to have agreed with Hughes, but by this point we are surely wary of believing everything we read from Hughes's pen. When he writes that they all began 'with the Latin and a crib', is this not simply part of the mythologizing process that gives the production and therefore the translation more credibility? It does come in a draft of the preface to the book, and so it was designed for the public to read, rather than being for his own records.

Perhaps I am guilty of underestimating what a group of theatre-makers in the 1960s could usefully do with a Loeb text before them. It seems likely that the reported experience of a protracted collaboration with the Latin text is a vague and time-stretched generalization of a single meeting, which he describes elsewhere:

Mr Brook, Irene Worth, Sir John Gielgud and I went through the Miller and the original in close detail together, examining what seemed to us to be every key epithet, verb and phrase, a completely new and quite different play was revealed to us. Mr Brook took enormous pains with this.³⁹

Hughes here paints an interesting scene. Can it be a reliable description? John Gielgud (1904-2000) attended Westminster School on a scholarship before leaving to train at RADA.⁴⁰ He therefore received a good deal of formal tuition in Latin language and literature in his school days.⁴¹ In spite of this ostensibly thorough early training, or perhaps because of it, Gielgud admits in 1968 to an uneasy relationship with classical plays:

I've always been frightened by Greek and Roman plays as I've always been frightened of Moliere...⁴²

Brook (b. 1925) also attended Westminster, and then Gresham's, before leaving for Magdalen College, Oxford. He too therefore was exposed to a good deal of Latin at a young age.⁴³ Hughes (1930-98), like Brook, required an O-level in Latin to enter Oxbridge, which

³⁹ 'Account of the transaction...', p.2, *THC*, MS.24.55.

⁴⁰ Oxford DNB.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² c.f. fn.21.

⁴³ Oxford DNB.

he obtained from Mexborough Grammar.⁴⁴ Even though Irene Worth (1916-2002), benefitting as she did from an education in American private schools, culminating in a degree at UCLA, might once have been able to thumb a Latin primer as well as the next man, it is hard to imagine her joining the fray as the old schoolboys flexed their syntactical muscles.

It is an unfortunate truth that language skills fade, especially unspoken ones and even more so after many years of disuse. It is on this basis therefore that, even if Hughes's account were partially reliable, I would question whether anything particularly useful could have come that day from the eyes of those assembled straying towards Seneca's Latin. The primary design of this account was to continue to paint Turner out of the picture. It was written to prove that Hughes was perfectly capable of creating his new translation by going back to the original Latin and without use of Turner's text.⁴⁵

Hughes worked so hard to distance his script from Turner's not only because of pride and a conflict of aesthetics. There were also important financial pressures acting on him at the time. The intense stress Hughes seems to have been under, due largely to having his aged parents, young children and partner, Assia Wevill, living all under the same roof, might partially explain the tenacity, bordering on ferocity, with which he and Olwyn Hughes, his sister and agent, conducted themselves in this affair with the National and Turner. Wevill, who had subsequently moved to a London flat with their daughter Shura, wrote in a New Year card, which she had decorated with painted angels:

Please God, send Ted a happy year – send him the Year he has waited for so long. And may he have more money than he absolutely needs, so that he won't ever again worry about ending up without any.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ This passage immediately precedes his reference to Turner's translation as a time wasting 'red herring'.

⁴⁶ Written between Christmas 1967 and New Year's Day 1968, less than 3 months before the opening of *Oedipus*. Koren, Y., & Negev, E. (2007) 171.

Money was clearly tight and Hughes was keen not to risk losing his rights on a play he had poured every effort into for months, and which he had transformed into a powerful and unique poetic script. But could he not have done this whilst also acknowledging Turner's input?

Brook seems to have been less willing to forget Turner's contribution to the process. In the Bowen interview Brook said that it was through Turner's translation that he himself first accessed Seneca's *Oedipus*:

I think if I'd read a literal translation I would have found it so turgid that it wouldn't have occurred to me that there was more to it. David Turner did a translation in a very cool, clipped manner that was very readable and made the strong bones of the play emerge.⁴⁷

The role of making the 'strong bones of the play emerge' would seem to be no small one. Whatever Brook meant by the expression, he at least acknowledges that Turner made an important contribution. If you took away his involvement from the play, firstly, it would not have been staged when it was, and secondly – when it had been – the play would have been completely different. It was Turner who brought Seneca's *Oedipus* into the open, and he who first made it accessible to Tynan, Olivier, Brook, the actors and Hughes.

Brook was a relatively late convert to the idea that Turner's involvement should be suppressed. It seems to have taken the following pushy, if not vaguely threatening, letter from Olwyn (acting as Ted's agent) written on 2nd February 1968, to win him round:

Mr Halifax [at the NT] told me today that your firm view of the matter was that the play should be billed as translated by Turner, adapted by Ted. This would of course be perfectly satisfactory if it were true. ... I don't know if Ted has told you, but he worked almost exclusively from the version in the Heinemann Classics Series after finding that Turner's vision of the play was not his. ... I should like this cleared up before things go further or surely we risk the possibilities of publication difficulties, letters to the Times and so on – you know what I mean, this just may become a bit of an obsession of Mr Turner as he's taken rather a big disappointment.⁴⁸

Ted and Olwyn Hughes were understandably worried about the play's billing because it might have impacted on future revenue from publishing and performance contracts. But was

⁴⁷ c.f. fn.21.

⁴⁸ Letter from Olwyn Hughes to Peter Brook dated, 12 Feb. 1968.

it fair not to acknowledge Turner's very real and practical contribution? Hughes's *Oedipus* is partially a rewriting of Turner's script, with a number of notable additions. Olwyn Hughes, presumably with no reason to question her brother's account and every reason to 'sex it up', stated categorically that:

My brother's adaptation is, in fact, from the Miller word-for-word, from the original Latin of Seneca, from ideas of his own, Mr Brook and Mr Thurley's and even from suggested wording by Miss Worth and Mr Gielgud. Except for two or three phrases from Turner's version, kept in for friendship's sake and which Ted intends to delete for publication etc., the writing is his own original creation which anyone familiar with his work can immediately recognise.⁴⁹

Although I now consider most of this account to be fictitious I am still oddly convinced by its conclusion. By great poetic skill and aggressive editing methods Hughes made Turner's *Oedipus* his own. His play is in the end a mixed-source translation that no one else could have made.

With reference to new archival findings I have offered revisions to the traditional narrative of Hughes's creation of *Seneca's Oedipus*. Hughes's description of his use of a 'Victorian crib' to 'eke out' his Latin is not an accurate description of his creative process. It consciously downplays his dependence on the two former English translations of the Roman play, and especially that of David Turner. I have shown that Turner's ground-breaking (if not entirely ground-shaking) translation was not completely obliterated from Hughes's version, despite the poet's best efforts. Although I feel Hughes was guilty of contravening some kind of literary honour code, by 'writing over' and not acknowledging a key source, I think it is important to remember that the final product and its reception is more important than the process by which it came about.

All that I have pointed out is buried deep in the text and not, I would argue, detectable via the medium in which it was designed to exist, that is live performance. Hughes's

⁴⁹ Letter to G. Rowbottom (General manager of NT) 30 Mar. 1968. *NTA Oedipus* 1968, production box, rights file.

translation process, in my view, is both fascinating and entirely legitimate – what is less pretty is what he did afterwards. However complex, artificial and mediated the process of creating Hughes's *Oedipus* was, the final product is a valuable dramatic text, with a rich performance history. It is an important example of how a classical text can be valuably accessed, critically understood and given new life via the mediation of translations. Finally, I hope my essay has shown how careful we must be in handling what translators write about their own translation practice. However much it might reflect their literary ideals and the expectations of the day, it may differ considerably from their actual translation practice.

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